

# THE PELASGIANS

## **Direct Ancestors Of The Later Great Greek Nation**

Pelasgians, the oldest known inhabitants of Greece, are supposed to take their name from Pelasgus, youngest son of Niobe, and are traditionally represented as a wandering people who left traces of their presence in every part of Hellas (Pelasgiotis, a district of Thessaly; the Pelasgicum or oldest parts of the Acropolis of Athens, built by them etc.). Regarding their origin and ethnical relations to the Greeks proper much diversity of opinion prevails; but although Herodotus distinguishes between them and the "true" Hellenes, and speaks of Pelasgian dialects still surviving in his time at Creston, in Thrace, and at Placia, in the Hellespont, Dionysius is probably right in regarding the Pelasgians as essentially Greeks. It may, in fact, be inferred from Thucydides that they represent the first waves of Hellenic migration into Greece and the islands, where they continued to lead wandering lives as pirates and rovers on the sea and marauders on the mainland before forming settled communities. According to this view, which seems most in accord with the national traditions, the Pelasgian dialects mentioned by Herodotus would represent an archaic form of Greek before it became differentiated into the later Aeolic, Doric, and Ionic dialects.

According to a number of classical quotes and modern studies, the Pelasgians were Hellenes (Greeks), and the direct ancestors of later Greek tribes. The arguments supporting this connection are as follows:

1. That the term "barbarian" had a dual meaning. Aside from meaning "non-Hellenic," the term "barbarian" has been used by Greek tribes/city-states to deride other Greek tribes/city-states that were deemed unsophisticated in their use of the Hellenic language/culture. For example, when Athenian orator Demosthenes attacked Philip II of Macedon in the Third Philippic, he deemed the Macedonians as non-Hellenic, unrelated to the Hellenes, and not even worthy of being deemed as "barbarians." This indicates that the utilization of the term "barbarian" in many ancient Greek accounts was reflective of the socio-political competition that existed between various Greek city-states, tribes, and civilizations.
2. From this dual meaning, Herodotus did not imply that the Pelasgians were non-Hellenes when he described them and their language as "barbaric." Support for this argument is found within a passage where Herodotus deemed the Hellenes as a branch of the Pelasgians. Moreover, it was not an uncommon phenomenon for a Greek tribe to speak Greek crudely to the point where it was difficult for other Greeks to understand. So, when Herodotus (1.57) concludes that the Athenians changed language when they joined the Hellenic body, it means that they advanced linguistically, socially, and culturally from their Pelasgian forebears. Herodotus (6.137) also discusses the expulsion of Pelasgians by the Athenians from Attica to

Lemnos. However, this passage may be derived from an event whereby the Athenians expelled Pelasgian Boeotian refugees (closely related to them culturally and linguistically) to the Ionian colonies. Herodotus is also known for not distinguishing the difference between linguistically similar dialects and languages that are completely separate from Greek. As a result of this ambiguity, the language of the Pelasgians was "barbaric" in the sense that it was an unsophisticated form of Hellenic as opposed to being non-Hellenic.

3. That the autochthonous nature of the Athenians (an ancient belief to which Herodotus, Isocrates, Plutarch and others attest) implies they are descended from the autochthonous Pelasgians. The Athenians deemed themselves "true Hellenes" due to their well-developed society.

4. During the early 20th century, archaeological excavations conducted by the Italian Archaeological Society and by the American Classical School on the Athenian Acropolis and on other sites within Attica revealed Neolithic dwellings, tools, pottery, and sheep skeletons. All of these discoveries showed significant resemblances to the Neolithic discoveries made on the Thessalian acropolises in Sesklo and Dimini. These discoveries helped provide physical confirmation of ancient records that described the Athenians as the descendants of the Pelasgians (who were primarily the Neolithic inhabitants of Thessaly).

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Quotes from ancient writings about the Greeks descending from the Pelasgians:

1. "The Hellenic race has never, since its first origin, changed its speech. This at least seems evident to me. It was a branch of the Pelasgic, which separated from the main body, and at first was scanty in numbers and of little power; but it gradually spread and increased to a multitude of nations, chiefly by the voluntary entrance into its ranks of numerous tribes of barbarians." (Herodotus, Histories 1.58)

2. "Before the time of Hellen, son of Deucalion ... the country went by the names of the different tribes, in particular of the Pelasgian. It was not till Hellen and his sons grew strong in Phthiotis, and were invited as allies into the other cities, that one by one they gradually acquired from the connection the name of Hellenes; though a long time elapsed before that name could fasten itself upon all." (Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War 1.1.3)

3. "... Pelasgians, a Greek nation which did not come from elsewhere but we were born autochthonous." (Plutarch, Peri fyges 604D-E,13)

4. "... for the Pelasgians, too, were a Greek nation originally from the Peloponnesus." (Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Roman Antiquities 1.17)

5. "This was the next Greek nation after the Pelasgians to come into Italy and to take up a common residence with the Aborigines, establishing itself in the best part of Rome." (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities 1.33)
6. "As for the Pelasgi, almost all agree, in the first place, that some ancient tribe of that name spread throughout the whole of Greece, and particularly among the Aeolians of Thessaly." (Strabo, Geography V.2)
7. "And I think that it was the fame of this city [Argos] that prepared the way, not only for the Pelasgians and the Danaans, as well as the Argives, to be named after it, but also for the rest of the Greeks" (Strabo, Geography VIII.6)
8. "Paris was absent. But soon afterwards, he brought into that land a ravished wife, Helen, the cause of a disastrous war, together with a thousand ships, and all the great Pelasgian nation." (Ovid, The Metamorphoses XII)